



Ten Ways to Deliver a Truly Exceptional Customer Experience

Lately, more businesses seem to be renewing their focus on service. Sales and service leaders speak with great enthusiasm about “building lifetime relationships” by “providing an exceptional service experience” and “creating customer delight.”

It sounds great! But what’s been your experience as a customer? Are you consistently delighted by the service you receive?

Our recent experience has been inconsistent. Some companies are definitely getting it right. Others are hit or miss. And a few seem like they just don’t care.

What accounts for these differences? Here are 10 practices that separate the best from the rest.





1 Listen to the voice of the customer.

The best service organizations use both internal and external measurements of service delivery. Internal measurements allow you to respond immediately with appropriate feedback and coaching. But only external measurements can tell you how your customers actually feel about the service you're providing.

Without valid external feedback it's easy to think you're providing great service when you're really not. One of our contact center clients used a rigorous set of internal standards as the basis for their quality monitoring and coaching. And according to these internal standards, their calls were averaging about 90% customer satisfaction. When they began to obtain feedback from real customers they found that the actual figure was 65%. This discovery was the wakeup call they needed to focus on what was most important to their customers.

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2 Put your service employees first.

The "inverted pyramid" is a key service concept stating that the most important person in the business is the customer. The next most important person is the front-line employee who directly serves that customer, then the person who supports that customer-facing employee, and so on.

Recently, leading service organizations have come to realize that the most important person in the business is actually the front-line service representative.



If it seems strange to put your employees ahead of your customers, remember that if your employees aren't happy then your customers won't be happy either.

3 Train for skill, hire for attitude.

A few years ago the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company won a Malcolm Baldrige quality award. One of our clients was also a winner that year, and we had an opportunity to attend the award ceremony.

Ritz-Carlton's Senior VP of Human Resources told the audience: "At the Ritz-Carlton, we don't put much emphasis on training. We put a lot of emphasis on hiring."

He explained: "At the Ritz-Carlton we cater to some of the most discriminating and most demanding guests in the world. It takes a very special kind of person to meet the needs of these guests. We can't train people to be that way; we have to hire people who are like that. The hotel business is not difficult. We can teach people the hotel business, but we can't teach them to be the kind of people who will do whatever it takes to provide truly outstanding service."

It was true then for Ritz-Carlton, and it's true now for every service organization.

4 Train service first.

What does your initial training curriculum look like?
How long is it, and what does it cover?

We've seen many initial training programs that included three or four weeks of instruction. Almost the entire curriculum focused on systems and procedures. Then, in the last week or on the last day, there were a few hours of training on customer service skills. What kind of message does that send about the importance of service in your organization?

The best service organizations put customer service early in their initial training. Then, as they cover systems and procedures, they build in the application, practice, and reinforcement of those service skills in role play situations. These companies understand that what representatives don't practice in training they will practice on real live customers. This training design sends a clear message about on-the-job expectations and the importance of service.

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5 Emphasize both dimensions of a WOW experience.

To provide a truly exceptional customer experience, representatives need to address two sets of needs.

One set of needs relates to the specific business reason why the customer is talking with you. We refer to these as "technical needs" or "taking care of the situation."



To address these needs representatives have to provide information, answer questions, solve problems, resolve situations, make recommendations. And they have to do this the first time, every time.

The other set of needs relates to the communication and interaction with the customer. We refer to these as “personal needs” or “taking care of the person.”

To address these needs representatives have to be courteous and personable. They have to be concerned and eager to help. They have to recognize unusual situations and respond appropriately. And, when necessary, they have to take the initiative to do something extra to help the customer.

The best service organizations understand that if they want to create a great service experience they have to take care of both sets of customer needs. And they have to meet the personal needs first. In other words, they have to take care of the person before they take care of the situation.

6 DIRFT, FIRST, TINTT.

DIRFT (do it right the first time). The best service organizations put extra efforts into answering questions, resolving issues, and solving problems the first time that they talk with a customer. First call resolution. One and done.



FIRST (fix it right the second time). The best organizations also emphasize the importance of service recovery. They recognize that a mistake or problem is really an opportunity. And they empower their representatives to do whatever it takes to resolve these mistakes or problems and keep their customers.

TINTT (there is no third time). If you can't do it right the first time or fix it right the second time, don't worry. Your former customers have already found someone else who can!

7 Explain customer expectations in concrete terms.

Many large service organizations are staffed with a new generation of young representatives who have never experienced good service themselves. What they consider good service isn't. Many of them just don't have the skills to build a positive customer relationship – especially in a short conversation or a three to five minute phone call.

How do we communicate expectations to these “NextGen” representatives?

Some companies are overly prescriptive. They itemize customer expectations in excruciating detail. One contact center listed 167 items on their quality monitoring form – including the specific number of times to say the customer's name!

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Other companies present broad themes with no concrete behaviors. They exhort representatives to “be polite” or “show that you care” or “respect the customer’s time.” These are all great ideas, but what do they really mean? And how can representatives know whether they’re fulfilling these expectations or not?

The best organizations provide a combination of broad themes and specific examples.

It’s hard for representatives to provide WOW service in a BLAH office.

8 Create excitement and celebrate success.

It’s not difficult to provide service that meets a customer’s needs. It’s not even difficult to provide service that goes above and beyond, that exceeds the customer’s expectations. That is, it’s not difficult to do it for one customer. But it’s very difficult to do it 50 or more times a day, for five days a week, for 12 months a year.

The best service organizations recognize the importance of maintaining a high energy environment where people can feel excited and have fun. It’s hard for representatives to provide WOW service in a BLAH office.

9 Fix the system.

The service experience depends on a combination of three factors: people, processes, and systems. The best companies treat every problem or complaint as an opportunity for improvement. Other companies expect their service representatives to compensate for their inadequate systems or customer-abusing processes.



Representatives can always apologize to customers for a temporary problem or an unusual situation. “I’m very sorry you had that experience. We’re aware of the situation, and here’s what we’re doing to fix it . . .”

On the other hand, what are representatives supposed to do when they are continually asked to explain the unexplainable or defend the undefendable? “I’m very sorry you had that experience. We get a lot of complaints but we just can’t get our act together to actually do something about it . . .”

What are you doing to create a great place to work?

10 Listen to the voice of the employee.

The best service organizations recognize that their employees are truly their number one asset and their greatest resource. If they want to know how customers are responding to a new policy or a change in pricing, they ask their employees. And they take their answers seriously.

The best organizations also survey employees about their supervisors and managers. What are they doing to create a great place to work? Then they listen, learn, and keep working until they get it right.

About The Elkind Group

The Elkind Group is dedicated to improving the performance of front-line sales and service teams. We help clients solve their most important performance problems, resulting in increased revenue, customer loyalty, and customer lifetime value.

The Elkind Group's approach integrates performance consulting, customized training, and executive coaching. We work with all levels of the organization to change mind sets, build skill sets, and create a culture committed to sustained performance improvement. For more information, visit www.elkindgroup.com.



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